

R.K.Narayan's 'The English Teacher': An Autobiographical Element

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Abstract: R.K.Narayan, one of the most distinguished Indian novelists writing in English, brings out autobiographical element in his novel, 'The English Teacher'. Narayan starts narrating his own sad story after the death of his beloved wife Rajam, impersonating himself Krishna and tries to establish contact with his departed wife; Narayan dramatically presents the whole tragedy of the untimely death of his young wife. The depth of his grief and sorrow is nakedly and profoundly and movingly reflected in the concluding part of the first section, through describing Krishna's response to Susila's death. The second part of the novel to the end of it describes Narayan's own spiritual experience of holding communion with the spirit of his departed wife. Leela, though a child, exerts her influence on her father, Krishna, by diverting and engaging his attention away from the adult world towards the world of childhood. This salutary influence helps reconstruct Krishna's disintegrated personality owing to the untimely death of his beloved wife, Susila; the presence of Leela who, with her redemptive power, helps her father Krishna overcome his sense of existential futility.

Keywords: autobiographical, spiritual communion, existential futility, irony, death

Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Narayana Swami is popularly known as R.K.Narayan. He is, beyond all shade of doubt, one of the most distinguished Indian novelists writing in English. Now it has become a convention to name the three pioneering Indian novelists as the venerable novelists of the early 30's of the 20th century. They are Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan. The first two writers have written their novels with a special commitment. Mulk Raj Anand is committed to the cause of the underdog and deals with the gross social injustice meted out to the down-trodden and oppressed--community in our society. And Raja Rao is committed to the religious and philosophical issues of life; but Narayan is not committed to any philosophy or any 'ism' in literary techniques such as 'existentialism' 'expressionism' or 'the stream of consciousness technique.' He is a keen observer of human life and the problems that are involved there in. He looks at life with absolute detachment and with artistic objectivity. He presents life as it is and as he sees and understands it. Narayan's range of the vision of life is limited to the people of the middle class. An artist is known by what he omits; and in this aspect, Narayan is compared with Jane Austen and Narayan is content with his 'little bit of ivory just so many inches wide'

Narayan creates an imaginary town of a modest size and he names it Malgudi. It is situated somewhere in the Madras Province and it is dominated by orthodox Brahmin families; and this culture is well reflected in the novel. It is against this imaginary locale that Narayan casts all his characters. Narayan himself belongs to a middle-class family and so he is well conversant with their psychology and the nature of the vicissitudes they pass through. And so his characters are true to life.

'The English Teacher' was published in 1945 approximately seven years after 'The Dark Room' was published(1938). And this novel was dedicated to his late wife, Rajam who died prematurely of typhoid in 1939. The unexpected, untimely demise of his most beloved wife, Rajam, now a mother of a little baby-daughter, left him in inconsolable sorrow and despair. And it took a much longer time to recover from this traumatic shock; and Narayan's busy pen had been frozen into silence for about six long years.

The original title of this novel as given by Narayan was "Grateful to Life and Death" but the American publisher, not pleased with the original title, suggested the present title of "The English Teacher". Narayan was so much infatuated with Rajam that he married her despite the fact that their horoscopes did not match. There cannot be a greater misfortune in the life of a young man than to have lost his most beloved wife at such an early age. It was at this time that Narayan addressed a letter to Graham Greene, stating that he had found it difficult even to write a letter and wondered how long this state would last.

Narayan, in his auto biographical account, "My Days" describes 'The English Teacher' as autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction saying that

**"the dedication of the book to the memory of
my wife should to some extent give the reader
a clue that the book may not be all fiction" (My days-134-135) [4]**

To an avid or critical reader the novel in question appears to be a kind of sequel to 'The Bachelor of Arts'. The protagonist of which was Chandran, a young bachelor of romantic disposition...but this novel, 'The English Teacher' takes different direction in its second half; Narayan starts narrating his own sad story after the death of his beloved wife Rajam, impersonating himself Krishna and tries to establish contact with his departed wife; thus the second part of the novel to the end of it describes Narayan's own spiritual experience of holding communion with the spirit of his departed wife.

The six year-gap in Narayan's career as a novelist can reasonably be attributed to Rajam's death which devastatingly shattered the very core of his being, both as a man and as a writer. Time hurts and time heals;

Such a long time it had taken for Narayan to come to terms with that shattering traumatic experience which found profound expression in the most autobiographical novel 'The English Teacher'. The depth of his grief and sorrow is nakedly and profoundly and movingly reflected in the concluding part of the first section, through describing Krishna's response to Susila's death. Narayan wanted to see the novel as an attempt to attain a philosophical understanding (My Days 135) To a casual reader 'The English Teacher' might appear to be a sequel to 'The Bachelor of Arts'.

There is a logical linear-wise development in Narayan's concept of the pattern of life as envisaged in "Manusmriti (which involves the four-fold progression)

The Varnasramadharma is centrally important in Hinduism and the four castes are bound to perform different duties in society as prescribed by the Manusmriti. It was devised on the principle of division of labour and the supreme caste-Brahmanism is held in the highest esteem-they are the depositories of the Vedic lore and as such they are the most enlightened of the four Varnas. According to the Manusmriti, the Brahmins are enjoined to pass through four stages respectively known as 1. the Brahmacharya 2.Grihastya 3.Vanaprastha, the third stage when the house- holder becomes a forest dweller or hermit prior to the final renunciation and the fourth and last one is Sanyasa.

At first 'The English Teacher' seems to be a sequel to 'The Bachelor of Arts' since Chandran, the hero of 'The Bachelor of Arts' is a bachelor and in the novel that follows "The English Teacher" Krishna has now entered the Grihastasrama. But in the second half, the story takes a different turn. Krishna is so possessed by the thoughts of his dear departed wife, Susila, he, through the medium of a spiritual master, learns to hold communion with the spirit of his departed wife; actually, this is purely autobiographical and the agony that Narayan experienced over the untimely death of his wife Rajam, Krishna (like Narayan) for sometime was other worldly. A sense of complete detachment from this mundane life marks this period of his life. Krishna grew philosophical and reflected on the meaning of existence on this side of the grave and life beyond the grave.

The majority of critics and readers felt that the second part of the novel could hardly sustain interest, since, the Narayan brand of mild irony and gentle humour is totally absent there; and regarded this one as 'a broken-backed novel'.

The anonymous reviewer of the 'London Times' saw it as changing,

“for the worse after Susila's death and felt there was a weak and disappointing conclusion to a tale of unaffectedly light and delicate texture.” (The Times) [7]

No less an eminent critic than K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

“The attempts at psychic communication as introducing a whimsical or fantastical element into a story that has so long been transparently true to life, with the consequence that it is difficult to feel that the first and second halves of 'The English Teacher' blend naturally and make an artistic whole.” (IWE-369-370) [3]

John Thieme Commenting on this observes;

“Despite its bipartite structure, change in tone and movement from domestic life to the 'spiritual', 'The English Teacher' is the most thematically unified novel of Narayan's first period.” [6]

Narayan very realistically presents the factors ultimately leading to the death of Susila by typhoid. While visiting the newly constructed houses in the Extension, Susila happens to enter a lavatory which was most unhygienic and she came out with a profound sense of disgust; and consequently, she fell ill and died of typhoid. It is no wonder that such a thing has happened; since an orthodox Brahmin is very sensitive to hygienic conditions and uncleanness affects them adversely. Here mention of Krishna's colleague, one Sastri, must be made. Sastri is the immediate inspiration to Krishna, the English teacher, Sastri is held in high esteem by Krishna who calls the former, 'a definition of knowledge', a strange combination of things at one end and at the

other he had the spirit of a pioneer 'a marvelous man--a most energetic extender'. And Sastri owns the very first flat to the New Extensions. It is obvious that Sastri and Krishna belong to the new generation of Malgudi and, as such, they may instinctively feel that they must move to the New Extensions from the 'old' Malgudi; and incidentally, this unexpected, domestic tragedy in the life of Krishna has taken place! Now there is a sudden vacuum in Krishna's life; it is under such circumstances weak hearted people are tempted to commit suicide although suicide is not the way out of the problem. Moreover, Krishna has a baby-daughter, the very replica of her mother; yes; it is at least for the sake of the child, he must live. Generally speaking, culturally resourceful ones survive any crisis that is ever so trying; the death of his wife, so harrowing and unbearable, has opened hitherto unknown, uncharted avenues; Krishna discovers a new dimension in himself, the spiritual side; now he is physically detached; now he would have spiritual union with her. Krishna is on his spiritual voyage now, experiencing a strange thrill of holding communion with the spirit of his departed wife through para-psycho-approach he learned from an English mystic-Paul Brunton; Krishna, while slipping by slow degrees into the normal life, Leela, his baby daughter, the unfailing reminder, of his wife, Susila, lends him a new lease of spiritual life.

In this context, Harish Raizada comments:

"This new and strange type of contact with his dead wife, introduces a fresh charm in his life and his interest in these occult meetings increases more and more. He now goes about his work with a light heart and feels as if a dead load has been lifted from his mind. The day now seems full of possibilities of surprise and joy to him." (36) [2]

Apart from what the critics say about the novel 'The English Teacher' let us see what Narayan himself sums up the change of direction in his autobiography---My Days,

"That book (The English Teacher) falls in two parts--one is domestic life and the other half is spiritual. Many readers have gone through the first part with interest and the second part with bewilderment and even resentment, perhaps, feeling that they have been baited with the domestic picture into tragedy, death, and nebulous, impossible speculations." (My Days,135) [4]

Why Susila was ill and was declining towards death, Krishna was seriously reflecting on the causes of insanitary condition of the place and believes they were because of the New Extension,

John Thieme remarks in this context:

"the strange combination' that it represents--the challenge represented by the coming of modernity to Malgudi is the cause of the tragedy." (John Thieme -59) [6]

The sudden, premature death of Susila leaves Krishna in a state of void and vacuum; fortunately for Krishna, his late wife has left behind a female child--Leela---who becomes the sole source of comfort and consolation to him.

Leela, though a child, exerts her influence on her father, Krishna, by diverting and engaging his attention away from the adult world towards the world of childhood. This salutary influence helps reconstruct Krishna's disintegrated personality owing to the untimely death of his beloved wife, Susila; the presence of Leela who, with her redemptive power, helps her father Krishna overcome his sense of existential futility. And Krishna realizes after he resigns from college the fact that, inner peace must be attained through withdrawal from the adult world into the world of children.

We observe that the presence of Leela, the very replica of her mother, Susila, is very significant since it is she who acts like elixir and to a large extent brings him back to his normal self and it is chiefly, she who finally brings the disparate strands of the novel into a unified whole.

True wisdom, it seems, is begotten of sorrow and suffering; joys and pleasures are mere shadows, and unsubstantial things what man thinks is his forever, is just an illusion. Man makes a solitary journey from birth to death; and all other things that he lays his hands on, will leave him as they have come!

The paragraph preceding the concluding one of the novel reveals Krishna's reflections that contain the truth, the whole sterling truth of life:

"Wife, child, brothers, parents, friends....We come together only to go apart again. It is one continuous

movement. They move away from us as we move away from them. The law of life can't be avoided or altered the law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother's womb." (TET-177) [5]

And the Bhagavad Gita stresses the same truth; naked have we come into the world and naked shall we go out of it; and all these material possessions we have acquired we leave them behind, when we die; and nothing, not even an iota of what we have acquired will follow us after our death. This is the truth and the whole truth about life. Narayan realizes this truth so early in life sorrow and suffering in life, reveal the eternal truths; this is what wise men have understood from life. Solitude precedes that great act of meditation and this marks total detachment from the physical world and that is the ideal condition for man to have free communion with the spirit of the departed ones. Krishna's mind 'becomes a chamber of fragrance.'(TET-184) [5]

The novel 'The English Teacher' by the common consent of critics is considered the best novel of Narayan's first phase of novelistic career.

Krishna realizes that man's lot in the journey of his life in the ultimate analysis, is his unaccountable deep sense of loneliness and separation that haunts him throughout his life. This, he believes, is the truth about man's life. Krishna is terribly obsessed with the thought of the untimely death of his wife and he desires to have communion with the spirit of his departed wife. And he succeeds in achieving it through the self- imposed rigorous spiritual discipline and through the agency of one British oculist named Paul Brunton, who was resident in Mysore at that time. (My Days-148-50)

Narayan is hundred percent correct when he confesses that 'The English Teacher' is his autobiographical novel. The very facts of his life have been recorded with great fidelity; there is little fiction in the novel. Narayan dramatically presents the whole tragedy of the untimely death of his young wife. He writes with a deep sense of poignancy in a paragraph in his book, "My Days" within hundred days of her arrival, Rajam (his wife) had departed from this world; she caught typhoid in early May and collapsed in the first week of June 1939. Looking back, it seems as if she had a premonition of her end; she had wanted to stay back with her parents and sister. "I have described this part of my experience of her sickness and death in 'The English Teacher' so fully that I do not, perhaps, cannot go over it again."

Glimpses of great truths are revealed to man in the hour of deep sorrow and excruciating suffering; Krishna has such a glimpse of truth when he experiences profound sorrow; he realizes that a world of innocence and purity to attain inner peace; so withdraws from the adult world and adult work into the world of children.

Nobody could account for this sudden, unexpected disease of hers; and it was at first wrongly diagnosed as malaria and afterwards it was confirmed as typhoid; but Susila's mother had thought that the reason for the mysterious illness of her daughter was due to 'Evil- eye'---for she could hardly believe that her daughter who was so hale and healthy, should ever fall a victim to such a fatal disease as typhoid! In small towns like Malgudi, people easily attribute any sudden illness to a person to 'Evil-eye' although science labels it as superstition. No doubt, it was, to Narayan, an irretrievable loss. All the efforts of all the exorcists have been of little avail. The doctor, out of modesty, says "no, don't belittle these people" "there is a lot in him too, we don't know" Perhaps there is a subtle suggestion here that even the doctor trained in science, views the exorcist sympathetically!

As long as man believes in God, he must believe in Satan! And the 'Evil-eye' is attributed to Satan--universally people believe with deep conviction, that there is what is called an 'Evil-eye'. Modern science may dismiss it downrightly as superstition, willy-nilly, the belief in evil spirits and 'Evil-eye' is universal; there have been films in modern times such as the famous Japanese Production, 'The House Where Evil Dwells' which deals with this theme in a most credible manner; and in another English Picture entitled, 'The Exorcist' the Priest tried to exorcise the evil spirit out of the victim supposed to be possessed. All Christians believe in evil spirits, ever since Christ had exorcised the evil spirit from a herd of swine! There are certain things which are beyond the sphere of science; and it is unwise to believe that all that is outside the purview of science, is fantasy or superstition. The prophecies made by the Delphic oracle came true, although by a mysterious, circumlocutory way. Let's leave it at that, since it is controversial. But Narayan himself confesses that he did have communion with the spirit of his dead wife.

Krishna, in search of the ultimate truth or reality of life, in the process, passes through an inferno of complexities and confusions; Literature and philosophy fail him in search of the ultimate reality. He embraces spirituality as a last resort and succeeds in holding psychic communion with the spirit of his dead wife, Susila.

Narayan voices forth his opinions regarding the English system of education in our country as being unhealthy and he gives vent to his feeling of disillusionment with the college, in an uncompromising letter of resignation.

Krishna airs his opinion in the letter and asserts that he is against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of education that makes Indians cultural morons, but efficient clarks for all their business

and administrative offices.

The other important character in the novel, is the Headmaster through whom Narayan mediates his views on matters of importance such as the prevailing system of education and personal cleanliness!

Krishna, brought up in the colonial system of education, and later on teaching in the same system as English teacher, feels repulsive or repugnant to this system. Says Krishna,

“I am up against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of education which makes us morons, and cultural morons, be efficient clerks for all your business and administrative offices.”(TET-206) [5]

In the final chapter, Krishna resigns from his job as English teacher, then working to a nursery school and learning psychically communicating with the spirit of his dead wife, Susila. 'The English Teacher' is the fourth novel---the other three being 'Swami and Friends', 'The Bachelor of Arts' and 'The Dark Room'. And the first phase in the novelistic career of R.K.Narayan ends with 'The English Teacher' and Narayan shows a greater degree of maturity in handling a domestic life of short-lived felicity. And after the untimely demise of the protagonist's wife, the spiritual quest to contact psychical contact or communion with the spirit of his dead wife, has been handled in a masterly way. This is the best of his four novels of the first phase of his literary career.

Narayan's description of the moments of Krishna-Susila's wedded bliss, be they ever so brief--shows the couple in a mood of lyrical felicity and as being transported into the seventh heaven of delight—but all of a sudden, Krishna has been relentlessly cast down from the topless heights of his conjugal joy to the abysmal depths of inconsolable grief. But in the midst of the darkness of his distress, there is the flickering light of hope, the see of his joy that lends him the strength to bear all this sorrow--his little daughter--Leela---the very replica of her mother who is no more now but a mere memory of the past!

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar very aptly observes in this context,

“The story of their wedded life is a prose lyric on which Narayan has lavished his gifts as a writer.” (IWE-367) [3]

In the life of the English Teacher that is, Krishna, Narayan relives marital life with Susila, in the guise of Krishna. Narayan confesses that this novel, 'The English Teacher' has been his most autobiographical one and the dedication of this novel to his departed wife, confirms it.

In his very first novella 'Swami and Friends' Narayan's own experiences as a school boy to a greater extent have been incorporated. The autobiographical element is very thinly garbed and in his second novel 'The Bachelor of Arts' once again we see Narayan as one at the end of his adolescence and the threshold of his adulthood; and like Chandran, in 'The Bachelor of Arts', falls head over ears in love with a young maiden, almost at first sight, as Narayan did with Rajam and in both the horoscopes that do not match, stand as an insuperable hurdle. But in the case of----for marriages, especially in South Indians Brahmin families, horoscopes must match to go without a hitch.

Narayan, in spite of the fact that horoscopes do not match in his case, has overcome the hurdle by a clever trick devised by him.

And, if we keep aside 'The Dark Room' his third novel for a while, the novel that follows it is 'The English Teacher' which deals with the married life of an English Teacher.

Thus one circle or period of life is complete with 'The English Teacher' and Narayan's first phase of his career as a novelist has been over and 'The English Teacher' is by the general consent of critics, regarded as the best of the four novels of this period. The Headmaster's philosophy of 'Leave Them Alone' serves two purposes in the novel; Firstly, it announces the teacher's denunciation of the system of education, especially for children, where, in order to bring children under discipline, punitive measures are imposed and, secondly, the immaculate company of children in their pure innocence acts like a balm to a mind in deep distress; so Krishna, the English teacher, resigns from his job and later on joins the children's school whose motto is 'Leave Them Alone'. Now Krishna feels a greater peace of mind and he says to himself:

“I am seeking a greater inner peace I find I can't attain it unless I withdraw from the adult world and adult work into the world of the children.” (TET-211) [5]

Finally we see Krishna as one passing through the journey of life, experiencing both joys and sorrows and lastly realizing inner peace enjoying the blessings of both the worlds.

Towards the close, the disparate strands of the story begin to come together into a harmonious whole.

And it is not out of place to quote what Lakshmi Holmstrom says in this context;

“The Psychic experience is treated seriously and in

**detail but finds that it contradicts the most moving
and most credible parts of the novel.” (47) [1]**

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